

The Use of Information Operations to Weaken Military and Political Alliances in Advance of a Ground Invasion

Kent Heiner
CISS 473
Spring 2024

ABSTRACT: Classic texts on the theory of war often mention the value of disrupting enemy alliances in advance of – or even in place of – armed conflict. This paper will discuss some modern examples of such efforts, particularly the use of information operations, and examine the role of cyberwarfare therein. The Russian invasion of Ukraine will be the primary case study, with extensive examination of its presumed effects in the United States.

Contents

Theoretical background and historical examples	2
The Russian-Ukrainian War.....	3
The United States as theater of Russo-Ukrainian conflict	6
Tactics	10
Candidate Trump	13
Conclusion.....	14
References	17

Theoretical background and historical examples

Military scholars have long recognized the value of disrupting hostile alliances. In chapter three of *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu wrote that “Subjugating the enemy’s army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence. Thus the highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy’s plans; next is to *attack their alliances*; next to attack their army; and the lowest is to attack their fortified cities” (Sun-Tzu, n.d., emphasis added). Likewise, in Book VIII of *On War*, Clausewitz wrote (in [chapter four](#)):

... the following circumstances chiefly bring about the overthrow of the enemy:

1. Dispersion of his army if it forms, in some degree, a potential force.
2. Capture of the enemy's capital city, if it is both the center of the power of the State and the seat of political assemblies and actions.
3. *An effectual blow against the principal ally, if he is more powerful than the enemy himself.* (emphasis added)

The most obvious type of modern alliance in this context is a military alliance between nations, with NATO being the greatest modern example. This paper will treat the term “alliance” broadly, also looking at political alliances within a nation.

The relationship between a hostile nation’s army and its people is an important and obvious political “alliance” that can be targeted. During Clausewitz’s time, this relationship came to the fore in the Napoleonic Wars, during which “the best armies found that a part of their method of war had become utterly unserviceable ... the prodigious effects of the French revolution abroad were evidently brought about much less through new methods and views introduced by the French in the conduct of war than through the changes which it wrought in state-craft and civil administration ... in the condition of the people, etc.” During the twentieth century, the importance of the relationship between armed forces and the general population was further articulated by guerilla fighter-authors such as Che Guevara and Mao Zedong, who wrote that “The guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea.”

The United States has made extensive use of propaganda, both truthful and untruthful, to achieve its political and military objectives by swaying public perceptions in contended territory. Memorable 20th-century examples include the 1954 coup d'état against the Arbenz government in Guatemala; the attempted 1961 overthrow of the Castro regime in Cuba, culminating with the failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs (Bohning, 2000); and the 1989 invasion of Panama (Tracy, 2021).

The most key domestic “alliance” is that between a nation’s armed forces and its policymakers. Preceding the 1991 and 2003 conflicts with Iraq, the US enjoyed some successes in using propaganda to drive a wedge between Iraq’s government and its armed forces. By means of leafletting and electronic communications, Iraqi forces were convinced to abandon their tanks and to surrender. In the 2003 invasion, this was accomplished by hacking into a closed Iraqi communications channel (Clarke, 2010).

While propaganda efforts commonly precede military strikes, cyberattacks (at least as they are commonly conceived of) are less common; as a preparatory measure for a ground invasion, the effectiveness of denial-of-service attacks, for instance, has not been clearly demonstrated. We have as a near-example Israel’s 2007 air strike on a nuclear facility in Syria, which was likely made possible by a cyberattack on Syria’s air defenses (Clarke 2010). We also have the 2008 cyberattack on Georgia preceding the Russian seizure of some territory there, with the cyberattack providing no clear military advantage. Similar Russian attacks in Ukraine (the January and February attacks on Ukrainian government web sites preceding the February 2022 invasion, for instance) have produced similar lackluster results. In the following discussion, we will see that it seems to be the propaganda aspects of Russia’s activity in cyberspace that have promised the greatest military advantages.

The Russian-Ukrainian War

The targeting of both internal/domestic and external alliances in Ukraine by Russia will now be discussed, with particular attention paid to information operations (what the Russians call “active

measures”) and the cyberwarfare aspects thereof. “Information operations,” as the term will be used here, encompass more than just propaganda, extending to cyberattacks and the analysis of an adversary’s vulnerabilities.

Of all the former Soviet republics, Ukraine is of prime significance to Russia for two reasons. The first is ideological in nature: both countries’ historical roots are in Kyiv. The second is Ukraine’s strategic position on the Black Sea; the port of Sevastopol on Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula has long afforded the Russian navy access to the Atlantic Ocean via the Mediterranean Sea.

Popular uprisings in Kyiv began in 2013 with demands for a free trade agreement with the European Union and resulted in the overthrow of Viktor Yanukovych, Ukraine’s Russian-aligned president, in late February of 2014. This is the background for the war that followed. Russian policy was that Ukraine should be firmly in Russia’s sphere of influence. When politics failed to achieve this result, Russia resorted to Clausewitz’s infamous “other means.”

Nearly immediately after Yanukovych’s fall, Vladimir Putin ordered the return of Crimea to Russian control (BBC, 2015). Crimea’s seat of government and airports were then seized by “little green men:” Russian soldiers in unmarked fatigues and pro-Russian paramilitary. In a matter of less than a week, the Russian annexation of Crimea was completed with the installation of a puppet government in the occupied regional capitol.

Ukraine’s February “Revolution of Dignity” was protested in the eastern area of Ukraine known as Donbas, where ethnic Russians comprise a much larger minority (38 to 39 percent) than in Ukraine as a whole. These protests were partially genuine and partially Russian-manufactured in nature. Separatist protests in Donbas grew with Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Before two months had passed, two new Russian-run governments had been declared in Donbas: the People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. It was these areas which came under Russian military occupation in the invasion of February 2022.

There was a brief period in early 2014 during which attempts were made to manufacture an identity for the two breakaway republics, namely a “Novorossiia” promoted by, among others, Aleksandr Dugin, the Russian political commentator whose role is either that of Putin’s muse or the clearest advocate of his policies (Roozenbeek, 2022). This effort came to an abrupt end in July 2014 with the shootdown of Malaysia Airline flight 17 over Donetsk by pro-Russian forces. But in the meantime, local journalists were kidnapped, beaten and expelled until the mass media came under Russian control and began disseminating hate propaganda, painting Ukraine as a regime akin to the Nazis that had been defeated in Donbas during the Second World War (Roozenbeek, 2024). In Donbas-based online propaganda, much attention was directed toward Ukraine’s Azov battalion, whose military insignia included the Sonnenrad symbol associated with neo-Nazism (Lopatto, 2022). Internet sources, especially social media, were far more toxic in this regard than local media (Roozenbeek, 2019).

This myth of Ukrainian Nazism was in line with Putin’s own justification for the invasion, which alleged a “genocide” being committed by Ukraine against its Russian-speaking citizens (Brandt and Wirtschafter, 2022).

Putin squandered any remaining pretext of moral justification for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine with his surreal televised address on February 24, declaring a “special operation” to “strive for the demilitarization and de-Nazification of Ukraine.” Eight years after the initial occupation of Ukraine, Putin’s claim that the Russian military was entering Ukrainian territory “to protect people who have been abused by the genocide of the Kyiv regime” has failed to gain any purchase among Ukrainians or a global audience. Accusing perceived enemies of Nazism or fascism is a typical Kremlin disinformation narrative (Lopatto, 2022).

Thus striking one of the early blows in what would come to be the eventual death of irony, Putin essentially repeated Hitler’s 1938 annexation of the Sudetenland in the name of anti-Nazism.

After years-long repetition of such messaging, Putin expected that by the time Russian soldiers invaded the Donbas, they would be joined in the fight by Russian-speaking Ukrainians; this was a “colossal miscalculation,” in the words of Jon Roozenbeek (2024).

The United States as theater of Russo-Ukrainian conflict

It was during this same period that messages of hate and fear also became noticeably more common on social media in the United States. By 2015, Americans were asking themselves why they had become so divided, and a common answer at the time was to blame social “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles” created by social media algorithms or the very nature of social networking (Adee, 2016). But ten years of hindsight offer a much different answer. The United States was one of several countries which fell victim to Russian active measures designed to weaken the West and diminish resistance to further Russian incursions in Ukraine. The result has been the escalation of tensions that have lingered since the Civil War into a low-level state of insurgency, with the 2021 siege of the United States Capitol being the largest of many violent incidents intended to overthrow the traditional system of American government (Heiner, 2023). Simultaneously, and in a way that remains largely unexplained, Vladimir Putin’s alliance with (if not dominance over) one of America’s major political parties and even its former president has become all but transparent.

It is fascinating to note that in 2012, the United States was nearly united in voting to create a legal framework for sanctions against Russia’s criminal oligarchs. The Magnitsky Act was named after a Russian accountant who had been jailed and beaten to death in prison after revealing too much about the extent of corruption and extortion in Russian business; it passed the Senate by a vote of 92 to 4. At the same time, a Cold War-era bill was repealed in a sort of compromise with the (Democratic) White House, which was unenthusiastic about the Magnitsky Act and wished to normalize trade relations with

Russia. While prominent Republicans such as Senator John McCain and Presidential nominee Mitt Romney warned of potential aggression from Putin's Russia, these warnings tended to be dismissed by Democrats. In the 2012 presidential debates, Barack Obama ridiculed Romney for his stance, retorting that "the Cold War's been over for 20 years."

In the 12 years since then, it is not only the case that the respective stances of these two parties have completely reversed, but that the leadership of the Republican party and a significant part of the US electorate have embraced Putin. The Russian role in this shift in US (and generally, Western) politics is best examined through the lens of the "Gerasimov Doctrine," the 2013 work of the top Russian general of the same name who "laid out a new theory of modern warfare—one that looks more like hacking an enemy's society than attacking it head-on" (McKew, 2017). Gerasimov advocated a *four to one* ratio of non-military measures to military ones. (Tashev *et al*, 2019). These non-military measures include both cyberattacks and the dissemination of propaganda through inauthentic social media accounts, sympathetic celebrity figures, and "fake news." These propaganda campaigns need not be consistent, because the tactic is often less about Russia *winning* in the information domain and more about everyone else *losing* (McKew, 2017). By operating a "firehose of falsehood" (Paul, 2016), Russia overcomes skepticism toward the messages it wishes to promote; but also, according to historian Timothy Snyder, it aims to reduce public confidence in the very feasibility of distinguishing truth from fiction via a demoralizing "campaign to undermine factuality" (Frum, 2018; also refer to Snyder's remarks to the US House of Representatives on April 17th).

Aeneas Tacticus and other ancients wrote of the need to secure a city's open spaces, its public squares, so as to deny the enemy a place to gain a foothold. In the hardening of modern "public squares," the equivalent open spaces where discourse takes place, Western democracies appear to have failed miserably. Social media data was eagerly sold to firms like Cambridge Analytica, who used it to target

susceptible segments of the electorate in pursuit of Russian objectives such as the UK's split from the EU and Republican victories in the 2016 election; the idea was conceived in 2014, an important year in our story, by an employee of Steve Bannon, who later became Trump's chief strategist (Cadwalladr, 2018; Chan 2019).

The effectiveness of the Gerasimov Doctrine over the past ten years is difficult to assess. To what extent were Britain's secession from the European Union and Donald Trump's election to the US presidency the result of Russian interference rather than a primarily domestic change of direction? Perhaps Putin himself overestimated his own success in these two outcomes, leading him to his mistaken expectations of being welcomed into Donbas. Whatever the ultimate effectiveness of these particular efforts, Russian investment in them is clear.

Yevgeny Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency, founded in 2013, was one focal point of Russia's efforts to influence public opinion in the west. The abstract for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's report on "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018" is well worth reading for its overview of Russia's social media reach during this time period (US Senate, 2019).

A more overt, but somewhat thinly disguised, channel of Russian propaganda for foreign consumption is the state-funded "news" organization RT (Russia Today). RT has enjoyed a notable presence on American social media, and has produced programs hosted by famed American newscaster Larry King. It is not difficult to draw a direct line from this Russian propaganda outlet to the Russian-style propaganda that has come to dominate the messaging of the Trump-era GOP. At a 2015 dinner celebration of RT's tenth anniversary in Moscow, Trump campaign adviser Michael Flynn sat at Putin's right hand (Windrem, 2017). General Flynn, formerly the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, became Trump's National Security Adviser for a brief time before being caught lying to the FBI about his contacts with Russian Ambassador to the US Sergei Kislyak. His prosecution resulted with a guilty plea in 2017, a

long delay in sentencing, and finally a pardon from President Trump in November 2020 amid Trump's efforts to overturn the election. Beginning in 2016, Flynn had spoken of and eventually led a pro-Trump "digital warrior" movement endeavoring to dominate public opinion on the internet. By 2019, this movement was largely indistinguishable from the pro-Trump "Q-Anon" cult, a loosely-defined but dangerously delusional worldview that demonizes the opposition to the point of calling for their mass arrest and execution. Flynn spoke at Q-affiliated 2019 "Digital Soldiers Conference" in 2019, and released a video performing a Q-Anon oath in mid-2020. After the election, he spoke at a pro-Trump "Stop the Steal" rally in Washington. A week after his pardon by Trump, Flynn joined Trump lawyer Sidney Powell in calling for the imposition of martial law to preserve Trump's presidency (Meyer, 2020). Q-Anon symbols were carried or worn by many of those who invaded the US Capitol in 2021. By 2022, Q-Anon would arguably become the guiding influence in the Republican Party (Silverman, 2022). This month, the Republican chair of the House Intelligence Committee was finally moved to complain about his party's parroting of Russian propaganda on the House floor (Lotz, 2024); and the Republican chair of the House Foreign Affairs committee lamented that "Russian propaganda has made its way into the United States, unfortunately, and it's infected a good chunk of my party's base" (Finley 2024). Russian propaganda is Q-Anon propaganda; one of the two Congressional representatives most identified with Q-Anon was called out by a former FBI assistant director for counterintelligence this month for spreading foreign propaganda (Alesia, 2024). This Congresswoman, Marjorie Taylor-Greene, is also prominent in coverage of GOP obstruction of aid to Ukraine (Brennan, 2024). "Marjorie Taylor Greene Can't Stop Pushing Russian Propaganda," the New Republic reports this month (Rashid, 2024), joined by Greene's former House colleague Ken Buck: "Moscow Marjorie is focused now on this Ukraine issue and getting her talking points from the Kremlin and making sure that she is popular and she is getting a lot of coverage" (Finley 2024). This month, Greene sponsored an amendment to a Ukraine aid bill that would



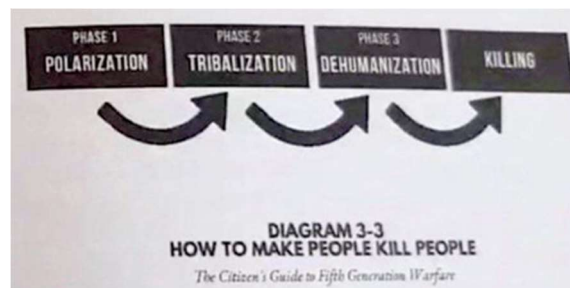
require the US to withdraw from NATO; another such amendment referred to Kremlin propaganda so far removed from the concerns of the American voter that Greene's alliance with Putin could not have been more obvious: it called for a remedy to the supposed Ukrainian repression of ethnic Hungarians in Transcarpathia. After revelations from the Czech government of Russian donations going to elected

officials there, discussion has arisen about the same patterns here with regard to Trump and House Speaker Johnson (Finley 2024).

While Flynn was in Moscow with Putin, a delegation from the National Rifle Association was meeting with one of Putin's deputies who had been sanctioned by the US after the 2014 annexation of Crimea (Mak, 2017). The NRA donated \$30 million to the Trump campaign and was later reported by the Senate Finance Committee to have acted as a "foreign asset" to Russia during the election cycle (Mak, 2019). One is tempted to argue that Americans of all ages have become casualties of Putin's war in Ukraine due to his influence on the GOP in general, and in particular the NRA's lobbying against any federally-sponsored analysis of gun violence, let alone any effective legislation.

Tactics

In 2022, Flynn wrote *The Citizen's Guide to 5th Generation Warfare*, which includes the following illustration in the quintessential Kremlin-QAnon-GOP tactic of "flipping the script" and accusing your opposition of your own open criminal behavior:



The demonization of the press in the Trump era is outstanding in its use of Russian tactics to dismiss Russian tactics: Set yourself up as the only source of truth; accuse your enemies of your own bad behavior; inspire violence without directly committing it.

The term “fake news” originated as a reference to online influence campaigns such as that undertaken by Russian intelligence to influence the 2016 election in Trump’s favor; but led by Trump, the term was soon appropriated ... by the right wing to refer to any journalism, legitimate or otherwise, which was critical of Trump. Trump maligned the press as “the enemy of the people.” Attacks on journalists became widespread under Trump. Local and federal police shot at and brutally beat journalists covering the 2020 civil rights protests. The pro-Trump mob at the US capitol attacked journalists and destroyed their equipment. Inspired by Trump and the hysterical right-wing propaganda ecosystem that supported him, in 2018 Cesar Sayoc mailed bombs to prominent Democrats and to CNN offices. Numerous smaller and less-publicized attacks on the press took place (Heiner, 2023).

The “flipping the script” tactic is also demonstrated in the effort to discredit President Biden. The prevailing view among most conservatives appears to be that it is Biden, not Trump, who is incapable of speaking coherently, who is weaponizing the government against his enemies, is corrupt, etc. With Trump having been impeached twice, Republicans are determined to hold hearings to impeach Biden, regardless of having nothing of substance to charge him with, only unsubstantiated rumors of wrongdoing in (surprise, surprise) Ukraine. A resolution to that effect (House Resolution 57) was introduced the day after Biden’s inauguration. House Resolution 521, the motion to censure Congressman Schiff for his successful leadership of the Trump impeachment effort, goes so far as to deserve the overused term “Orwellian” for its language; and therein we are once again reminded of the war’s central role in the demise of Lincoln’s GOP by the accusation that Schiff “misled the public by reading a false retelling of a phone call between President Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky”.

The GOP and its allies have also fully embraced the Russian “firehose of falsehood” tactic. The January 6th violence at the Capitol was supposedly the work of “Antifa,” or of federal *agents provocateurs*, and

the masses were duped into a “false flag” operation, but those who face federal charges are nevertheless martyrs and heroes. One could go on at length.

Russia’s interference in the 2016 election on behalf of Donald Trump is well-documented, and included not only the electronic dissemination of propaganda, but also hacking exploits to steal information that Russia later publicized. The best-known of these exploits was the theft of emails from the Democratic National Committee which were then used in an effort to allege the DNC’s institutional bias in favor of Hillary Clinton at the expense of Bernie Sanders and encourage Sanders supporters to withhold their support from Clinton in her race against Trump.

This hack-and-leak strategy was foreshadowed in early February 2014 amid the uprising in Ukraine: “Relations between the EU and the United States were among the first openly political targets of Russian digital active measures,” writes Thomas Rid (2020). Russia managed to intercept two phone calls, one between two American diplomats complaining about the EU’s weaker stance on Yanukovych’s brutal repression (“Fuck the EU”), and the other between two EU officials complaining about American diplomats privately trash-talking the EU. The audio from the calls was posted to YouTube and then referred to in a tweet by an aide to a Russian deputy prime minister, after which the story was picked up in the mainstream media.

It is certainly worth noting that Trump’s early campaign manager, Paul Manafort, had earlier been a campaign adviser to Viktor Yanukovych and was eventually charged for acting as an unregistered foreign agent. Even as he endeavored to sell out his own country to the Russians, Manafort conspired with them to frame Ukraine for interfering in the same election (Beavers, 2020). Alexandra Chalupa, an advisor at the DNC, tried to raise the alarm about Manafort’s presence on the Trump campaign and subsequently became a key subject in Manafort’s false narrative, which eventually came to be repeated by some US Senators (Tapper, 2019). Chalupa endured anonymous threats and harassment (*Gaslit Nation*, 2019).

“Blame it on Ukraine” is of course a common feature in Russian deception. When military intelligence officer Aleksey Lukashev crafted the batch of DNC phishing emails that got him into John Podesta’s gmail account and eventually into the DNC itself, he duped Podesta into giving away his password by reporting that his account had been accessed from an IP address in Ukraine (Rid, 2020). And, as mentioned previously, the Russian-sponsored GOP accusation of corruption against the Biden family revolves around alleged dealings in Ukraine.

Attacks on US critical infrastructure are also an echo of the war in Ukraine, as I wrote in a 2023 paper on right-wing extremism in the US:

A recent spate of attacks on critical infrastructure, particularly power facilities, suggests another aspect to this right-wing war on the status quo. These attacks call to mind Russia’s recent acts of low-intensity warfare, such as the 2014 attack on the Ukrainian power grid. But whereas Russia is thought to have caused the Ukrainian power failures by means of direct cyberattack, the US attacks have been physical in nature and inspired by online content. According to The Guardian, a set of documents recently leaked from a Russian government contractor “suggest that Russia sees attacks on civilian critical infrastructure and social media manipulation [in the US and elsewhere] as one and the same mission, which is essentially an attack on the enemy’s will to fight.”

Candidate Trump

To measure the extent of Trump’s alliance with Putin, let us begin with former CIA officer John Sipher’s assessment (“Is Trump a Russian Agent?”):

Among other things, Trump has attacked the FBI and U.S. foreign policy establishment, driven a wedge between NATO and the U.S., and delivered Russia a free hand in Syria. He willingly enabled the very damage that the Russians were promoting.... Needless to say, for his part Trump gained an ally in his effort to damage Hillary Clinton, benefited from Russian disinformation, and explored personal financial rewards. He clearly crossed a line and can be objectively labeled an agent of a foreign power in the standard definition of the word. From the Russian perspective, it is a win-win even if the relationship doesn’t meet the cloak-and-dagger definition of a wholly clandestine espionage agent (Sipher, 2019).

Trump openly called on Russian assistance, implicitly on their hacking capabilities in particular, in the 2016 election. “Russia, if you’re listening,” he said at one rally, Would you please surface Hillary Clinton’s deleted emails? His family members and campaign manager famously met with Russian lawyer Natalya Veselnetskaya, hoping for dirt on Clinton but instead receiving a boring presentation on the supposed unjustness of Magnitsky-Act sanctions against Russia.

Trump has often repeated Kremlin talking points, on subjects ranging from the front-page news of carnage in Syria (Lybrand and Cohen, 2019) to obscurer topics such as Montenegro’s NATO membership (Abramson 2018), and as far back as the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan (Blake, 2019). He has offered extensive praise of Putin and other authoritarian figures (Cillizza, 2022), and said that he took Putin at his word when he denied interfering in the 2016 election.

Trump’s connections to Moscow go back to the 1980s, as the Russian mafia moved into New York (and Trump Tower in particular), aided by Rudy Giuliani’s prosecution of the Italian families. His continuing connections, including aspirations of building a Moscow Trump Tower, have been discussed regularly in forums such as MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow show and documented thoroughly by journalist Craig Unger (2018, 2021). A more extensive review is not feasible here.

Conclusion

In her March 29th newsletter last month, historian Heather Cox Richardson reported that “On Wednesday the nonprofit, nonpartisan Institute for the Study of War published a long essay explaining that Russia’s only strategy for success in Ukraine is to win the disinformation war in which it is engaged.” The essay, pointing to the enormous economic advantages over Russia enjoyed by Ukraine’s Western allies, emphasizes that “The Russian strategy that matters most ... is not Moscow’s warfighting strategy, but rather the Kremlin’s strategy to cause us to see the world as it wishes us to see it and make

decisions in that Kremlin-generated alternative reality that will allow Russia to win in the real world” (Bugayova *et al*, 2024).

Even though De Jomini wrote that “the excited passions of a people are of themselves a powerful enemy” and ought to be repressed in the enemy, the essay’s position is still an astonishing one to take in the context of thousands of years of the theory of war. And yet it is one that is not easily refuted. Furthermore, if we follow this premise to its likely consequences and connect the related facts in the manner shown above, we find an explanation for the equally astonishing turn of events in America during the past ten years. Bugayova and company imply that Russia (correctly!) sees its influence on Western public perceptions as *more critical* to its invasion of Ukraine than historical considerations such as the training of its soldiers, the coordination of their movements on the battlefield, and the reconnaissance of hostile armed forces. From our review of the history of the war, it seems clear that this propaganda war is and always has been key to Russia’s strategy in Ukraine, particularly with regard to the United States. The US has supplied billions of dollars in aid to Ukraine over the course of the war, almost as much as all other countries combined, and a staggering amount of weapons and equipment of all sorts, from air and sea vehicles to infantry weapons, artillery and armored cavalry (Masters & Morrow, 2024).

The fall of Ukraine’s pro-Russian president in 2014 was followed by Russia’s immediate military mobilization. Crimea was strategically urgent and geographically advantageous, so Putin took it immediately in an easily observed, though partially disguised, military campaign. The strategy for taking Donbas was far less observable but proceeded almost as immediately: the mobilization of disinformation forces targeting both Ukraine and the West. As the invasion of the Crimea lost the attention of the Western public, political discourse on social media became toxic; Britain elected to leave the EU; US politics took a shocking lurch to the right; and we all asked ourselves why. In the final

days of the 2016 election, we may have done a double-take when we saw multiple Facebook accounts posting an identical and awkwardly worded anti-Clinton message on multiple discussion threads (I did), but what could we do but shrug it off?

The Republican party altered their platform to soften its support for Ukraine during the 2016 national convention at the behest of the Trump campaign; that bit of information may have fallen on the ears of the voting public as a whisper. The much-publicized Mueller investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election was dismissed by Trump as “Russia, Russia, Russia,” but underlying all of that was Ukraine. Paul Manafort went to jail, and we didn’t talk about his role in Ukraine. It wasn’t until Trump was impeached for trying to blackmail Volodimir Zelensky into framing Trump’s opponent that the whisper of “Ukraine” became a clearly audible exclamation to average Americans, and by then we had stopped cursing about Facebook’s dirty deals with Steve Bannon’s Cambridge Analytica. Similarly, we don’t think of the 2016 election when we hear in 2024 that Bannon has hosted a talk show in which Marjorie Taylor Greene opposes support for Ukraine. We don’t connect the dots. We don’t connect Pizzagate to Q-Anon to Michael Flynn to Putin and least of all to Ukraine. We don’t connect the “Ukrainians are Nazis” rhetoric to the “Democrats are satanists” rhetoric because as Americans we think we are the dog, and not the tail. Foreign-sponsored insurgencies and coups d’etat are things that happen to other countries (if you’re a conservative) or perhaps recognized as something we do to other countries (if you’re a liberal), but never vice versa. We are the center of the world, not collateral damage in someone else’s war.

De Jomini also wrote that “strategy alone will remain unaltered” as new inventions revolutionize tactics. Russian cyber-vandalism has not crippled Ukraine or resulted in widespread destruction; it has played a smaller but significant role in a full-spectrum approach to warfare. What is novel in this war is Russia’s method of pursuing the ancient strategy of disrupting hostile alliances, particularly its use of social

media. The extent of its reach into the United States and the success of its messaging in the years since its 2014 invasion of the Crimea suggests a great investment in this strategy.

References

- Abramson, Alana. (2018). Why President Trump's Comments About Montenegro Were a Win for Vladimir Putin. <https://time.com/5341790/donald-trump-vladimir-putin-montenegro-nato/>
- Adee, Sally. (2016). Burst the Filter Bubble. *New Scientist*.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0262407916321820>
- Alesia, Mark. (2024). Former FBI official accuses Marjorie Taylor Greene of spreading foreign propaganda. <https://www.rawstory.com/raw-investigates/frank-figliuzzi/>
- BBC. (2015). Putin reveals secrets of Russia's Crimea takeover plot. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31796226>
- Beavers, Olivia. (2020). Senate report describes closer ties between 2016 Trump campaign, Russia. <https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/512487-senate-panel-releases-final-report-on-russian-interference-detailing/>
- Blake, Aaron. (2019). 6 times Trump has sided with a foreign country over the U.S. government. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/01/10/times-trump-has-sided-with-foreign-country-over-his-own-government/>
- Bohning, Don. (2000). U.S. propaganda war preceded exile landing at Bay of Pigs. *Miami Herald*.
<https://www.latinamericanstudies.org/bay-of-pigs/propaganda.htm>
- Brandt, Jessica and Valerie Wirtschafter. (2022). The surprising performance of Kremlin propaganda on Google News. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-surprising-performance-of-kremlin-propaganda-on-google-news/>
- Brennan, Chris (2024). Marjorie Taylor Greene doesn't want to help Ukraine. That's exactly what Russia wants. *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/columnist/2024/04/12/house-republicans-aid-ukraine-russia-war-putin/73275132007/>
- Bugayova, N., Kagan, F. & Stepanenko, K. (2024). Denying Russia's Only Strategy for Success. *Institute for the Study of War*. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/denying-russia%E2%80%99s-only-strategy-success>

- Cadwalladr, Carole. (2018). 'I made Steve Bannon's psychological warfare tool': meet the data war whistleblower. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/data-war-whistleblower-christopher-wylie-faceook-nix-bannon-trump>
- Chan, Rosalie. (2019). The Cambridge Analytica whistleblower explains how the firm used Facebook data to sway elections. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/cambridge-analytica-whistleblower-christopher-wylie-facebook-data-2019-10>
- Cillizza, Chris. (2022). Donald Trump just can't stop praising Vladimir Putin. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/28/politics/trump-putin-ukraine-russia-smart/index.html>
- Clarke, Richard A. and Robert K. Knake. 2010. *Cyber War: The Next Threat to National Security and What to Do About It*. HarperCollins.
- von Clausewitz, Carl. (1832). *On War*. <https://clausewitzstudies.org/readings/OnWar1873/TOC.htm>
- Congressional Research Service. (2024). U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12040>
- Finley, Alex. (2024). Russia Is Buying Politicians in Europe. Is It Happening Here Too? <https://newrepublic.com/article/180630/russia-corruption-network-europe-buying-politicians-america>
- Frum, David. (2018). The Great Russian Disinformation Campaign. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/07/the-great-russian-disinformation-campaign/564032/>
- Gaslit Nation podcast. (2019). Interview with Alexandra Chalupa. <https://www.gaslitnationpod.com/episodes-transcripts-20/2019/6/22/the-alexandra-chalupa-interview>
- Heiner, Kent. (2023). Insurgency as a Conceptual Model for Right-wing Extremism in the Trump Era. (Unpublished essay for English 230 at Whatcom Community College.) <https://heiner.monstro.us/manuscripts/Insurgency-ENGL230.pdf>
- de Jomini, Antoine-Henri. (1838). *Summary of the Art of War*. (1862 translation by Capt. G.H Mendell and Lieut. W.P. Craighill). <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/13549/13549-h/13549-h.htm>
- Lopatto, Lenny. (2022). The Limits of Putin's Propaganda. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/limits-putins-propaganda>
- Lotz, Avery. (2024). House Intelligence Committee chair says Russian propaganda has spread through parts of GOP. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/07/politics/mike-turner-russia-ukraine-propaganda-gop-cnntv/index.html>

- Lybrand, H. & Cohen, M. (2019). Fact check: Trump parrots talking points from Putin, Erdogan on Syria. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/18/politics/donald-trump-russia-turkey-talking-points-syria-kurds-fact-check/index.html>
- Mak, Tim. (2017). Top Trump Ally Met With Putin's Deputy in Moscow. *The Daily Beast*. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/top-trump-ally-met-with-putins-deputy-in-moscow>
- Mak, Tim. (2019). NRA Was 'Foreign Asset' To Russia Ahead of 2016, New Senate Report Reveals. *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/27/764879242/nra-was-foreign-asset-to-russia-ahead-of-2016-new-senate-report-reveals>
- Masters, J. & Merrow, W. (2024). How Much Aid Has the U.S. Sent Ukraine? Here Are Six Charts. <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-much-aid-has-us-sent-ukraine-here-are-six-charts>
- McKew, Molly. (2017). The Gerasimov Doctrine. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/gerasimov-doctrine-russia-foreign-policy-215538/>
- Meyer, Ken. (2020). Michael Flynn, Newly Pardoned, Calls for Trump to 'Temporarily Suspend the Constitution' and Impose Martial Law. <https://www.mediaite.com/politics/michael-flynn-newly-pardoned-calls-for-trump-to-temporarily-suspend-the-constitution-and-impose-martial-law-edited/>
- Paul, Christopher. (2016). The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>
- Rashid, Hafiz. (2024). Marjorie Taylor Greene Can't Stop Pushing Russian Propaganda. <https://newrepublic.com/post/180678/marjorie-taylor-greene-pushing-russia-propaganda>
- Rid, Thomas. (2020). *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Roozenbeek, Jon. (2019). Media and Identity in Wartime Donbas, 2014-2017. (PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge.) https://www.cam.ac.uk/sites/www.cam.ac.uk/files/jon_roozenbeek_-_media_and_identity_in_wartime_donbas_2014-2017.pdf
- Roozenbeek, Jon. (2022). The failure of Russian propaganda. <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/donbaspropaganda>
- Roozenbeek, Jon. 2024. *Propaganda and Ideology in the Russian-Ukrainian War*. (Talk given at Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute on 26 Feb. 2024 previewing the forthcoming book of the same title.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydPf7qHQLiA>
- Sipher, John. (2019). Is Trump a Russian Agent?: Explaining Terms of Art and Examining the Facts. <https://www.justsecurity.org/63660/is-trump-a-russian-agent-explaining-terms-of-art-and-examining-the-facts/>

- Silverman, Jacob. (2022). QAnon's Takeover of the Republican Party Is Virtually Complete. *New York Magazine*. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/03/qanons-takeover-of-the-gop-is-virtually-complete.html>
- Sun-Tzu. (n.d.). *The Art of War*. 1994 translation by Ralph D. Sawyer. Barnes & Noble.
- Tapper, Jake. (2019). GOP-led committee probed possible Ukraine interference in 2016 election and found nothing worth pursuing, sources say. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/02/politics/senate-intelligence-ukraine-2016-election/index.html>
- Tashev, B.; Purcell, M.; & McLaughlin, B. (2019). Russia's Information Warfare: Exploring the Cognitive Dimension. *Marine Corps University Journal*.
https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/MCUJ_Fall2019_10_2_web.pdf
- Tracy, Jared M. (2021). Spreading the Word Fast: PSYOP in Operation JUST CAUSE. https://arsof-history.org/articles/21feb_psyop_just_cause_page_1.html
- Unger, Craig. (2018). *House of Trump, House of Putin: The Untold Story of Donald Trump and the Russian Mafia*. Dutton.
- Unger, Craig. (2021). *American Kompromat: How the KGB Cultivated Donald Trump, and Related Tales of Sex, Greed, Power, and Treachery*. Dutton.
- United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. (2019). *The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018*. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/senatedocs/1/>
- Windrem, Robert. (2017). Guess Who Came to Dinner With Flynn and Putin. *NBC News*.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/guess-who-came-dinner-flynn-putin-n742696>